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SUBJECT: UN INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: MEMBER STATES REJECT
RELIGION AS JUSTIFICATION FOR TERRORISM

REF: STATE 120844

¶1. Summary: President Bush and approximately 80 heads of state, senior government officials, and other representatives gathered November 12 - 13 for an "Interfaith Dialogue" as part of the United Nations General Assembly (GA) plenary session. Saudi King Abdullah bin AbdulAziz al-Saud, the driving force behind this meeting, criticized terrorists who purported to act in the name of religion. Israeli President Shimon Peres reached out to the many leaders of Arab states in the room by describing the Arab peace initiative as "a serious opening for real progress." President Bush emphasized freedom of religion and noted that for generations the United States has defended the religious liberty of others. Delegates thanked King Abdullah for his leadership, expressed support for the July 2008 Madrid Conference, and called for continued interfaith initiatives. Some raised the threat of "Islamophobia" and alluded to restrictions on Freedom of Expression as a solution. Following the conclusion of the Interfaith Dialogue, SYG Ban and Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal held a press conference during which SYG Ban read a declaration affirming member states' rejection of the use of religion to justify acts of terrorism, violence, and coercion. End Summary.

PGA Focuses on Shared Morals and Values;
SYG Calls for Dialogue that Delivers

¶2. A Saudi-driven "Interfaith Dialogue" was held under the agenda item "Culture of Peace" during the GA,s plenary session November 12-13. President of the General Assembly (PGA) Miguel D'Escoto's opening remarks focused on his usual theme of shared ethics and values, rather than on interfaith dialogue. "It is not only Wall Street that needs to be bailed out," he said, but also "humankind from its social insensitivity." D'Escoto called on member states to seek the moral strength to address hunger, malnutrition, and poverty. He strayed far off topic by going into elaborate detail about the late November Financing for Development conference in Doha. UN SYG Ban Ki Moon noted that anti-Semitism remained a "scourge" and "Islamophobia has emerged as a new term for an old and terrible form of prejudice." He said that mutual understanding and respect were necessary for peace to endure, adding that interfaith initiatives increasingly addressed that need. Ban urged the international community to pursue dialogue and new partnerships.

Saudi King Attributes Violence to Intolerance;
Israeli President Calls Arab Peace Initiative "Promising"

¶3. Saudi King Abdullah bin AbdulAziz al-Saud, repeatedly preferred to as "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" by the PGA and others, said that religions should not be used as

"instruments to cause misery." He added, "Terrorism and criminality were the enemies of every religion," and attributed their existence to "the absence of tolerance." He said all humans were created equal and could either live together in peace or be consumed by hatred. Shimon Peres, directly addressing King Abdullah, said, "I was listening to your message," adding "It is right...it is promising." He continued, "we can shape our future" and "this seems more feasible in light of the Saudi proposal which evolved into an Arab peace initiative." Peres agreed with the initiative, noting that "a military solution...will not achieve peace or provide security."

Delegates Thank Saudi King; Call for Continued Dialogue

¶4. Delegates thanked King Abdullah for his leadership in inspiring the dialogue and expressed hope for continued interfaith initiatives. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown called for unity to ensure every child has the right to education "free of extremism." He said the creation of a Palestinian state was essential to achieving peace in the Middle East. Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo called for pursuing broader interfaith dialogue and asserted, "We will never accept violence cloaked in religion." Afghan President Hamid Karzai said conflict stems from "the pursuit of narrow political objectives," and not religion. He also called for dialogue and education "to rectify past failings."

Delegates Express Difference of Opinion on Freedom of Expression

¶5. Many delegates, especially those from predominantly

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Islamic countries, expressed concern over a rise in "Islamophobia" and held that freedom of expression could not provide the pretext for defamation of religion. The Senegalese delegate said that freedom of expression does not accord the right to defame religions. Organization of the Islamic Conference Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu said the media's linking of Islam with terror was the most "persistent" and "virulent" source of "Islamophobia." Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, as well as the Cuban delegate, said that the world must reject and respond to such defamation. The Belarusian delegate advocated "stricter self-discipline" of the media.

¶6. In contrast, other delegates noted the importance of protecting freedom of expression, emphasizing the need to focus efforts on diffusing incitement of religious hatred. President Bush underscored that "People who are free to express their opinions can challenge the ideologies of hate." Former French Prime Minister and Special Envoy of the President of France Alain Juppe, speaking on behalf of the EU, said, "Freedom of religion cannot be achieved without freedom of speech, even if it is sometimes used to express derision." The Chilean delegate stressed that freedom of expression could not be sacrificed due to "isolated incidents in particular regions."

UN SYG and Saudi FM Hold Press Conference; SYG Issues Declaration

¶7. Following the conclusion of the Interfaith Dialogue, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon and Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal held a press conference. SYG Ban said that the meeting "brought together people who might not otherwise have a chance to interact." He also read out a declaration affirming member states' rejection of the use of religion to justify acts of terrorism, violence, and coercion. Foreign Minister al-Faisal said that it was "incumbent on all participants to declare to the world that difference must not result in confrontation."

GA Approves Resolution on Interreligious
and Intercultural Dialogue

18. At the end of the meeting, the GA adopted by consensus its annual resolution, tabled by the Philippines and Pakistan, on "Promotion of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, Understanding and Cooperation for Peace." This resolution does not relate specifically to this Interfaith Dialogue, but rather to the regular agenda item on "Culture of Peace" under which the dialogue was held. United States Ambassador T. Vance McMahan provided an Explanation of Position (reftel). Ambassador McMahan affirmed that "free expression was the proper antidote for intolerance." As a result, he continued, "the resolution before us must not in any way be read to restrict peaceful expression of opinion or belief."

Wolff